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ABSTRACT

In overcoming the physical limitations of a single campus, distance education promises to diversify the student population, exposing students to a wider array of experiences and backgrounds. This paper reports how adequately distance education technology fulfilled that promise in a joint seminar in American politics that included students at the University of Florida and the University of Calgary (Canada). Students in the two locations were connected to each other and to the instructors at both locations. The goal was to allow Canadian and U.S. students to interact with professors at both campuses and with one another on a regular basis. The Calgary class was offered as an undergraduate seminar in U.S. politics, while the Florida class was offered as a senior colloquium. Since videoconferencing was envisioned as the major vehicle for student interaction from the two campuses, class times had to be coordinated from the outset, making recruitment of students more difficult. An e-mail discussion list was also provided, and examples of student postings are included. Group collaborations on research projects were encouraged, but logistical and human difficulties were compounded by the distance between the groups. Still, student evaluations on both campuses emphasized the added value that the videoconference format provided to the learning experience. (BT)

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A Joint Distance Learning Course in American Government

SO 029 597

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Introduction: Why distance education?

Universities, departments, and professors use distance education to achieve a variety of goals. First and foremost, the technologies of distance education allow educational institutions to reach students outside the physical confines and geographical proximities of their campuses. For some off-campus students, distance education provides a means to overcome significant barriers to receiving an education, including distance, schedule conflicts, confinement, disabilities, and the desire to avoid or maintain certain lifestyles or social influences. For both off-campus and on-campus students, distance education technologies enable students in different geographical areas to communicate with and learn from faraway experts, as well as from a more heterogeneous class of fellow students. Traditionally, the physical campus fosters a community of faculty and students who share the experiences of living in the same town, state or province, and country. In overcoming the physical limitations of a single campus, distance education promises to diversify the student population, exposing students to a wider array of experiences and backgrounds. (Ohler 1991) In this paper, we report on how well distance education technologies fulfilled that promise in our joint seminar in American politics which included students at the University of Florida and the University of Calgary that was held between January-April 1998.

We use the term "joint seminar" to differentiate our experience from other, more common distance education courses. The term "distance education" can refer to a myriad of arrangements involving the use of the internet, videoconferencing, and other technologies to enable students in remote locations to interact with one another and with faculty. Typically, distance education courses are offered by a single instructor over the internet to students at one or more remote sites. Alternatively, an instructor's lectures may be attended by local students, while they are also seen and heard via videoconference or videotape by students assembled at remote sites. In some cases, the class may be offered by one university and meet as per usual, but the instructor is in a different location. She may lecture back home to students via videoconferencing, and grade assignments submitted via email. In each of these arrangements, technology is used to overcome the physical distance between one instructor and a number of students.

In our joint seminar, we used the same technologies for a different purpose. Specifically, we wanted to connect students in two locations to each other and to instructors at both locations. Our goal was to allow Canadian and American students to interact with professors at both campuses and with one another on a regular basis.

The impetus for our experience was a Request for Proposals from the United States Information Agency (forwarded through the United States Information Service - Calgary). The mission of USIA is to further foreign populations' understanding of U.S. history, culture, and political system. In its RFP, USIA observed that "the role of distance education in the private sector has grown exponentially in recent years. At present, it is the principal growth field in U.S. higher education, and it holds the potential for playing a role in a wide variety of USIA programming." (USIA cable 07424, 1997) The USIA Distance Education Incentive Fund was established to encourage USIS posts' innovative use of distance education technologies as a

complement to their traditional role in facilitating academic, political, and commercial exchanges between U.S. citizens and their foreign counterparts. Through this fund, USIS Calgary provided support for our joint seminar in American politics. In total, this USIA fund supported seventeen projects around the world, including programs designed to enrich understandings of U.S. literature, civic education, and English as a Foreign Language Teacher Training programs. (USIA cable 13683, 1997) We understand that this program was available only in 1997, and USIA is no longer requesting proposals for this kind of support.

A stated purpose of our course was to provide an opportunity for students in Calgary to learn more about the U.S. government through interactions and discussions with an American class. There is a well-known asymmetry of information across the border between Canada and the United States. While many Americans have a somewhat vague understanding about Canada, Canadian students (and Canadians generally) learn a great deal about the United States and its political system through the American news media's penetration into Canada. Approximately one-quarter of the time that Canadians spend watching television news programs is spent watching foreign (mostly American) offerings (Jackson and Jackson 1994, 155) Nevertheless, the Canadian author would argue based on fifteen years of teaching American politics in Canada in three distinct geographical areas that that knowledge is sometimes basic and superficial, and students usually lack a full appreciation of the implications of the differences between the two political systems. We believed that Canadian students would gain a greater appreciation and understanding of the U.S. political system by interacting with an American professor and students. We also hoped that Florida students would gain a deeper appreciation of their own political system, as well as some insights on how some students in Western Canada perceived the United States.

Logistics can be fun

The logistical challenges in coordinating this class included scheduling, recruitment, and coordination of distance education resources. Each of these logistical challenges had implications and consequences for the students and instructors in the course. In this section, we will discuss those challenges, reactions to those challenges by the participants (ourselves and our students), and recommendations for the future. The students' assessment that are available to us include emails sent to the USIS representative in Calgary in response to her request for a course evaluation,[1] our respective universities' standard course evaluation instruments with both open and closed-ended responses, an exit paper written by the University of Calgary students for the course, and informal conversations with our students in and outside of class. None of the students reported ever having taken a distance education class previously.

Class scheduling

The Calgary class was offered as an undergraduate seminar in U.S. politics. Many Political Science majors in Calgary take a third year course in U.S. government and politics, and some elect to take the followup seminar either the next term or in the following year. Thus, the normal population is political science majors who have gained some familiarity with U.S. politics.

The Florida class was offered as a senior colloquium. Florida political science students are required to take an introductory class in American Federal Government, and may select from several other institution or policy specific courses. This class was intended to provide Florida students a seminar setting in which they could discuss a few general issues in American politics with other advanced students from both Gainesville and Calgary.

Because we envisioned that videoconferencing would be a major vehicle for the interaction of the students from the two campuses, the class times had to be coordinated from the outset. The Winter 1998 Calgary class had already been scheduled for Monday afternoons (4 p.m. to 7 p.m. MT) by the time we received word in April 1997 that our course would be funded. That immediately constrained the class time for the Florida class to meet at the same time (6 p.m. to 9 p.m. ET).

Several of these factors combined to make recruitment of students difficult. We had hoped to recruit about fifteen students on each campus to participate in our pilot effort. Our initial enrollments were much smaller, ten in Calgary and eight in Florida. Recruitment in Calgary was more difficult than it might have been because the first course in U.S. politics had not been offered in Fall 1997. Thus, the pool from which we drew students was limited to students who had previously taken the introductory course but not the seminar. In Florida, we asked colleagues to make special announcements in their Fall classes, posted signs, advertised on the department website, personally contacted some students who had previously taken Martinez's "Politics in Canada" course, and sent letters to prospective students. In Calgary, special announcements were posted in the department as well as in the Faculty. Moreover, the course and the involvement of the USIA grant was given coverage in the university newspaper. Still, recruitment was hampered by a number of factors. First, the course was labeled "senior colloquium" in the Florida official course schedule. Despite our advertising efforts, students who simply looked in the course schedule did not know about the content of the class. Second, we asked interested students to come in for an interview, to assure ourselves and the students that they understood the nature of the course. This meant that students could not simply register by phone, as they can with most courses in Florida. Although this limitation did not exist at the University of Calgary, registration was severely hampered by the lack of students who did not have the prerequisite introductory course in American politics. Third, the videoconference constraint on the class time was awkward for Florida students, most of whom are not used to taking classes in the evening. Fourth, students who did take the class reported that others perceived the class to be a lot of work, or at least a different kind of work. While we and many administrators are excited about the opportunities that distance education technologies create, some of our current resident students seem to be wary of being the guinea pigs in alternative formats.

In the future, we recommend that special courses' content be advertised in the regular course schedule and <u>not</u> be controlled during the registration process. Instead, students who do register under normal procedures should be sent an email (or letter) outlining the special features of the course. In this way, the class remains open to its constituent population, and those who are unable or unwilling to meet any special requirements of the course will likely drop the class on

their own volition either before classes begin or immediately afterwards.

The coordination of the class timing between the two universities remains a problem. Most undergraduates at the University of Florida are not accustomed to taking a three hour block seminar (although it is more common at the University of Calgary), but it had the distinct advantage in this class of providing some preparatory time on both campuses, minimizing the preparatory time needed during the actual videoconference.

We selected four major topics in American politics which had some currency in the literature and which highlighted some of the contrasts between the American and Canadian political systems: divided government, social welfare policy, budgetary politics, and participation reform. Because of the constitutional differences between the two systems and the recent spurt of interest in the causes and consequences of divided government in the United States (see Fiorina 1996), that topic served as the first overarching theme of the class. References to divided government were common in our discussions of the remaining topics.

In each topic, we arranged for a week or two of common readings, in which discussion was led by one of the instructors. Students were assigned particular readings, and expected to post summaries of those readings to a common email discussion list. Each topic also included a week in which a group of students presented a report to the rest of the class during the videoconference.

Class interactions

We provided several different formats to facilitate interactions between students in Calgary and those in Florida. First, we provided a common webpage[2] to reinforce the fact that the two classes would cover much of the same material and would be expected to work together. The webpage also provided a list of the student participants' email addresses to facilitate individual contacts between the students.

Second, we provided an email discussion list through a majordomo server in Florida. We encourage students to use this list to communicate with one another outside of class. Our initial class discussion began with the questions about what causes divided government and whether divided government makes any difference in the formation of public policy in the United States. Following the initial class (videoconference) discussion of this question, we asked students to elaborate on that question on the email discussion list. Generally, students' posts were elaborations of their own ideas, which probably reflects some students' (and professors') greater confidence in explicating their thoughts in writing. But it was also evident from references to other students by name as well as general references to others' ideas that students had read one another's contributions to the list.

One of our uses of the email list probably inhibited discussion during class somewhat, while at the same time, increasing students' ability to learn from one another and absorb greater amounts of material. We had a substantial reading list, and asked each student to take responsibility for

summarizing chapters or an article. In weeks with student presentations, the group selected and assigned readings with the assistance of the professors. Responses were (usually) posted to the email list prior to classtime, and this did ensure that each student could discuss something during class. This strategy made it more difficult to engage the class in an overall discussion of the readings, as it appeared that each student tended to invest most of their effort in digesting their "assigned" readings and making understandable summaries available to their classmates via the email list. Indeed, one Calgary student observed that

> The weekly reading assignments were also not that ... contributive to the discussion, the small sections that only certain students knew about the subject matter proved to limit the scope of the discussion. A more refined reading list for all students would have served the objective of an open dialouge (sic) much better.

Nevertheless, this use of the email list did contribute to students learning from one another, as the article and chapter summaries enabled students to digest more material in preparation for the midterm and final exams.

Videoconferencing was the principal technology that we used to promote interaction between students in the two classes, and its costs accounted for a significant part of our budget proposal to USIA. Since we anticipated that the seminar discussion would be at least slightly affected by the quality of the video and audio on each side, we budgeted for a high quality, ¼ T1, connection which would provide better video images than a standard ISDN connection.[3] As it happens, the Florida College of Engineering did not acquire the ¼ T1 dialup capabilities in time for our use in the class. Since we wrongly anticipated that a ¼ T1 dialup from Florida would become available, and the ¼ T1 dialup from Calgary to Florida would have required an extra currency conversion, we resorted to the less expensive ISDN dialup. As it turns out, the resulting video quality was acceptable when viewed on large monitors.

Our videoconferences were generally held in the middle hour of our three hour seminar time. During the initial hour, each of us either discussed material that was applicable to only one class, or more commonly, background material as preparation for the videoconference. For example, in the initial session, each of us discussed the course overview with our respective classes and asked two groups in each class to discuss the causes and consequences of divided government (Specifically, our questions were: Why do Americans seem to regularly elect a president of one party and a congressional majority of a different party? Does divided government make any difference in policymaking in the United States?) When the videoconference began, we introduced ourselves to the students in the other campus, and then asked the groups to report on their speculations about the causes and consequences of divided government. In this way, we were often able to use the initial hour to gear students up for the videoconference in the middle hour. Occasionally, we went overtime in the videoconference (which was paid for by our savings in using a lower quality connection). The final hour was used to debrief the videoconference, and to prepare students for readings in the forthcoming week.

While videoconferencing is an interactive technology, it is not instantaneous. Image and sound from one side are compressed at the origination site, transmitted, then decompressed and delivered to the video and audio output at the receiving site, all of which takes about a second. Thus, there is a short lag between the time that someone in Calgary spoke and the time that the Florida class saw and heard what was said, and, of course, another short lag between the Florida class's reaction and Calgary's reception. As a Calgary student wrote

> At first I was nervous because people in Florida heard my voice a few seconds after I had said it and the reaction delay was somewhat intimidating because you couldn't judge what they were thinking. Eventually, as we continued the process, I became more comfortable.

Videoconferencing is subject to technical "glitches." In our very first videoconference, Calgary heard an echo which resulted from Florida's mics picking up the Calgary audio as it was played in Florida. Occasional problems would crop up during the semester, but most were quickly resolved. Unfortunately, our very last videoconference, which we had intended as a wrapup for the course, was cancelled due to Calgary's inability to hear Florida audio. The problem apparently stemmed from the Florida side, as a result of another user changing settings without our student assistant's knowledge. On another occasion, a Powerpoint presentation planned by one group of students was jeopardized by the theft of a part from the Florida studio. Students had planned to show their Powerpoint screens on the Florida side. The problem was resolved by emailing the Powerpoint file to Calgary, and presenting it from that side.

Expert technical assistance was generally available to the Calgary side, since its studio was proximate and the technical staff was usually still on campus at the time that the class started. Due to the time of the class in Florida, technical assistance was provided by the student assistant assigned to the class. She had access by phone to more senior technical experts.

A Florida student observed that the presence of microphones, cameras, and monitors themselves can alter the seminar discussion.

> At first it was a little difficult getting used to seeing yourself on TV and figuring out what mic to talk into and where to look. But after the first couple of sessions, I think everyone adjusted.

Another Florida student wrote

> At first I was disconcernted about being on a television screen. I actually never quite got over it so I didn't speak very much becuase I didn't want to be focused on.

In conventional classrooms, most of us have encountered students who are very articulate and insightful in written essays, but who clam up in class discussions. Videoconferencing has a similar

effect on some students who are otherwise very participatory. One of our good students confided to a colleague, "Whenever the camera is on, I turn into such an idiot!" Other classroom tendencies were also magnified in this setting. As in other classroom settings, student oral presentations tended to be very fast and scripted.

As in other conventional classrooms, student discussion and participation waxed and waned. During some weeks and on some topics, students from one or both campuses were very participatory, and in other weeks, they were less so. During some weeks, we noticed that the discussion was primarily a dialogue between the two instructors. While at first this did not seem to facilitate our goal that students from the two countries to learn from one another, we eventually concluded that a lecture dialogue between professors from different countries did allow students in both countries to observe differences in our own assessments and emphases. In short, students who occasionally hear a dialogue between professors probably learn more about nuanced interpretations of politics than do students who hear a monologue from a single professor for the entire term.

> Getting lectures from both and American and Canadian professor(s) provided for some excellent learning and showed that very knowledgeable people can have different conclusions regarding areas of American politics (Calgary student)

> The chance to interact with people so far away, face to face on an individual basis was very rewarding. Working with students from another country was definetly (sic) and getting lectures from an American prof. made this course well worth taking and I would recommend it to others. (Calgary student)

> Many other universities (such as Trent) employ distance learning techniques in Social Science courses. They offer the student, access to a proffesoriate from a different perspective as well as an opportunity to see the issues from a people more emersed (sic) in the subject matter... If I were to change the class, I would try and make the discussions more focused, and possibly allow for full lectures by the professor in the other jurisdiction, which would entail more money allocated to time on the teleconference. (Calgary student)

Nevertheless, the videoconferences did seem to be successful in allowing students from both sides of the border the opportunity to convey their own impressions of the American political system through the lens of the common reading list.

> Yes, we were able to talk to students with views different from our own and experience a unique way of learning. Interacting with students from other countries enhances our knowledge and reduces stereotypes that could develop when people are not acquainted with other countries. Although I have travelled extensively, I appreciated the Florida student's (sic) views and their contribution to the subject matter. (Calgary student)

> Yes, gaining an outside perspective that would not exist in a regular class composed of only University of Florida students (Florida student)
>
> Set-up did help overall with comparative analysis and interpretation of U.S. political system that would not have existed in the normal classroom setting (Florida student)
>
> I believe that the overall videoconference was a positive experience. The interaction with the Canadian students allowed for us to listen to other views. (Florida student)
>
> Contrary to sitting in a normal classroom discussing American politics, we were able to gather an understanding of how those outside the U.S. perceive our political system. The videoconferencing not only helped dispel myths, but forced us to confront issues and ideas we would have not otherwise considered in a more parochial environment. (Florida student)

Similarly Canadian students learned a great deal more not only about American politics but also how Americans perceive their own political system and its problems:

> It was fascinating to watch the Americans themselves fight over the intricacies of social welfare and budgetary politics. It lends credibility to arguments I might not have believed or taken as stereotypical if I had simply read them in a textbook; hearing these arguments from the americans themselves created an understanding of their society and government I did not have before taking the class. (Calgary student)
>
> I believe that there are three sides to every story. My opinion, the other persons (sic) opinion and somewhere in those opinions lay the real truth. By discussing issues in class with my Canadian peers for an hour and then hearing the often greatly different viewpoints of Americans on their own political system, I was able to get a little closer to the truth about U.S. politics than if I had just taken a traditional class. (Calgary student)

In one of our later videoconferences, a Canadian student made the argument that the high crime rate in the United States and the low levels of political participation may be related, though not necessarily causally (see Powell 1982). He also tried to make the point that relatively burdensome registration procedures in the United States tended to decrease voter turnout, particularly among those with the least resources. This is, of course, a common claim (Powell 1986), though a view that is not universally shared (Franklin 1996). U.S. students had a fairly common reaction, noting from their own experiences that registering to vote was not all that burdensome, at least as compared to the difficulties faced by their immigrant parents and minorities who faced more formidable legal barriers in past decades. The Canadian student observed the irony of a group of

well educated (white) Americans dismissing the argument that registration barriers created greater difficulties for less educated citizens.

There were also some interesting interactions between American and Canadian students following expressed criticisms raised by Canadian students of certain aspects of the American system. While it is probably true that we are all less likely to accept criticisms of our own political system by outsiders, the Canadian students were sometimes surprised and often fascinated by the reaction of American students to outsiders' criticism. As one Canadian student wrote:

> Due to the nature of the personal interaction, the nature of the course highlighted both the biases of the Canadian students and those of the Americans. It was fascinating to gauge their reaction to critiques and criticisms of their system of government; while some were fiercely defensive, others were contemplative and found interest in an alternative point of view. (Calgary student).

Group Presentations and Papers

Most scholars who have collaborated on research projects have discovered both the joy and the trauma of learning and publishing together. Our attempts to encourage collaboration on presentations and projects was partially successful; our students discovered the traumas of coauthorship but the joys seemed to escape them. Part of the difficulties they encountered were simply based on the politics of sharing responsibilities and the logistics of time management. But those logistical and human difficulties were compounded by the distance between the groups.

Groups of three or four students (with no more than two students from each campus) were assigned to select readings, make presentations, and coauthor the final paper. In their collaborations, most of the groups did seem to communicate with one another (by email or phone) in selecting readings and preparing presentations. In each group presentation and in the final papers, students tended to select and report on individual articles on specific topics of interest, and do a reasonably good job of explaining at least the core theoretical point and empirical findings of that paper. While this division of labor facilitated coverage of a substantial literature, integration of that literature was often superficial. While it is relatively common for individual students (and scholars) in local settings to focus on their own individual studies, distance communications made it more difficult for the students to discuss *as a group* how to reach the next step of understanding the literature.

> It is difficult to coordinate group projects over E-mail and phones. While I enjoyed the teleconference and the discussions that we perpetuated (sic) during class, I found collaborative efforts disjointed and impractical since E-mail does not take the place of getting together and discussing what we want to present. (Florida student)

> The integrated papers with the students in the university of florida (sic) is a venture that is not going well. E-mail is still a bulky tool for that type of co-ordinated

effort. Allotted time for conference calls would help that process along. (Calgary student)

Technologies such as net conferencing are available to do this relatively inexpensively, and we should have made greater use of them. But, ultimately, we think that it is easier for students to exert social pressures to solve logistical problems on those whom they see face to face.

Recommendations

Our experience offers some lessons on how to conduct a joint class using distance education technology. Overall, we believe that we made some strides toward achieving our goal of providing alternative lenses through which Canadian and American students could observe the U.S. political system. Student evaluations on both campuses emphasized the added value that the videoconference format provided to the learning experience. In our oral discussion about the course, Florida students were asked if what they learned in this course was "more, less, about the same, or different" than in other upper division courses at the University of Florida. One student responded

> More and different. It's one thing for a professor to tell us what Canadians think about the United States. It's another for us to hear it from Canadians themselves.

Every student who responded to the USIS evaluation request said that they would take another joint course employing distance education technologies if one were available.

Of course, the distance technology that the students found the most valuable (the videoconference) is also the most expensive. Because both our universities had existing facilities and equipment, we encountered virtually no start up costs. Calgary's distance education facility did not charge the department for the use of its space. The College of Engineering facility at the University of Florida did charge a modest fee for rent of the room ($472.50 for 13 ½ hours, which included the services of the student "director") in addition to the actual charges for the videoconference connection ($859.47). But future classes could be self-funded through the imposition of an additional technology fee. For a course with thirty students (fifteen on each side) and costs comparable to ours, the technology fee would amount to $45 (U.S.) per student.

In retrospect, we may have expected too much in the way of students' ability or willingness to collaborate on joint projects. While we would not completely abandon the idea of requiring collaboration using distance education technologies, we will likely reduce the scope of the collaborative efforts that we require somewhat, as well as provide chat rooms and netconferencing facilities to our students.

Specific recommendations to the University of Florida. While the College of Engineering videoconference room was generally well suited for our purposes, improvements could be made with some relatively modest costs. Guests to the University of Florida very often comment about

the beauty of our campus. The combination of classic and contemporary architecture and well kept grounds impress many of our visitors, but those visiting U.F. through the College of Engineering videoconference facility see a sparsely furnished room with bare walls (but for a small College logo). A table skirt might dress the room up a little, as well as make it more comfortable for videoconference participants. The document display camera is helpful, and could be enhanced if a laptop computer with video output was available which would allow for multimedia display. We had originally selected the College of Engineering facility in hopes that it would have acquired the ¼ T1 dialup capability. While the ISDN connection did serve our purposes adequately, the option of a clearer (though more costly) transmission would be convenient.

Specific recommendations to the University of Calgary.

The videoconferencing room at the University of Calgary provided a better presentation of the University of Calgary than perhaps the room at the University of Florida did for them. At the same time it was perhaps a good thing that the class was small (down to eight by the time the semester got under way). A major difficulty was getting a wide enough shot of the entire room.

The major difficulty that this type of education format presents however is convincing students that it is valuable, educational and useful to them. As we mentioned earlier in the paper, students are apprehensive about being guinea pigs in the experiments that are occurring in higher education in both Canada and the United States. While this is perhaps a subject of another paper, it is apparent that students do not always approach the new technology with openness and a positive attitude.

Recommendations to USIA.

As USIA noted in the call for proposals, universities in the United States and abroad are rapidly moving into distance education as a means of extending the traditional borders of their campus. In some ways, these courses will parallel USIA's mission of broadening and deepening foreigners' understanding of the political, cultural, and economic system in the United States. Today, students in Canada and elsewhere can take courses in U.S. government, history, literature and politics via the web from U.S. universities. The "conversation" between students in those courses is often limited to chat rooms and email exchanges, which does in some measure expose students to the views and experiences of American students. But our course evaluations suggest to us that the videoconference was the experience that students in our classes found most valuable. Even when limited to talking heads, students thought that the "hot medium" combining image and sound was more effective than our other distance technologies in building cross-cultural appreciation.

Endnotes

1. Per her assurances to students, their comments were sent to us only after the conclusion of the term and the submission of final grades. Those responses were faxed to us denoting whether the response came from Calgary or from Florida.

2. http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/martinez/pos4936/

3. Technically, a ¼ T1 connection requires six lines to simultaneously transmit high quality video and audio in both directions. An ISDN connection requires only two lines, but the video image quality is not as sharp and more "jumpy".

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